DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 445 TE 001 722

AUTHOR Bannerman, Andrew
TITLE Approach to Shakespeare.
PUB DATE 69
NOTE 3p.; Published by Chatto and Windus, London
JOURNAL CIT Use of English; v20 n3 p239-41 Spr 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.25
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Dramatics, *Drama, Dramatics, *English Literature, Secondary Education, *Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Tempest (The)

ABSTRACT

For an introduction to Shakespeare's "Tempest," dramatic interest and tension were created in the classroom through taped interviews with survivors of present-day sea disasters, student improvisations of scenes, music, and historical accounts of shipwrecks. (MF)

The Use of English; Vol. 20, No. 3, Spring 1969

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED037445

APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

by

ANDREW BANNERMAN

I HAD NO intention that the lessons described here should be in any way an approach to Shakespeare. I was once given *Julius Caesar* to use with a second year Grammar School class—we enjoyed the murders of Caesar and Cinna the poet, stumbled through the forum and quarrel scenes, and called it a day. In some ways I think *The Tempest* is one of the most accessible of Shakespeare's plays for juniors. Just a glance at the *Dramatis Personae* should prompt something—A King, A Rightful Duke, A Usurping Duke, An Honest Old Counsellor, A Savage and Deformed Slave, A Jester, A Drunken Butler . . . but that idea came later.

An old church near where I live was once the marriage-place of Lord Howard of Effingham, Lord High Admiral of England at the time of the Armada—the man who led the fifty little ships against the great galleons packed with soldiers; the story is fascinating enough, and superbly told in a contemporary account included in a booklet I picked up in the church. A part of this account particularly struck me. Some of the galleons survived the perilous journey round Scotland only to be dashed against the rocks of the Irish coast. The survivors stumbled ashore, clutching what remained of their gorgeous accoutrements; the common soldiers had lashed their golden pay to their wrists and necks. The 'rough rug-headed kerns' who met them could not believe their luck, and stripped and slaughtered all those that the more chivalrous Irish lords did not drag off to their castles. Like many horrific stories, it has its faintly ludicrous aspect—and was a mixture potent enough, I thought, for the minds of 2L.

The class to whom I read this and other incidents from the contemporary account was a mixed second year group probably going to take C.S.E. in the fifth year. I chose them, rather than an older or more intelligent class, because I wanted to keep the development as flexible as possible. They were a boisterous, phantasmagoric crowd to me (whom they had only seen for a term and a half). Many had written and acted vividly, and I had also had some awful battles with them. An older, more cohesive group might have discussed the aspects of inhuman cruelty, national enterprise or historical influences. With 2L we moved on to aspects of shipwreck, taped interviews

with survivors (the Wellington harbour disaster occurred at this time); and on a different tack, diving for treasure with maps and guidance from a recent newspaper article.

But first there was Drama, which I had tried to insinuate into previous lessons with ragged results. The difficulty of persuading every individual to play his or her own role in a dramatic activity had seemed insuperable—a few would still not accept the possibility of *personal* exploration through drama. There is a sense in which reading and writing are secondary experience. Drama is in this sense primary, since the individual is responding through his senses and creating through his body. Put another way, you are on your own, without the protective conventional props of book and pen.

I tried first to show the reluctant actors what could be done by those willing to work on their own—a group of better actors improvised a shipwreck scene. There was much histrionic floundering and some giggles—but the overall tableau was impressive, as the bodies subsided to their positions on the sea-bed; and most important, for my purpose, no one relied on his neighbour purely for light relief. With the whole class trying the same idea, the overall picture became blurred and the giggles increased, but, with a few 'hard case' exceptions, everyone became involved in at least some of the relevant feelings—panic, confusion, terror, injury, suffocation, etc. The final collapse of everyone was of course an essential part of the scene at this stage—and the hardest to achieve—there were some mighty good swimmers around! Without this final 'exhaustion', I am sure I could not have moved on to the next stage—the first telling of *The Tempest* story. It occurred to me then for the first time that the wreck is of course integral to the theme of *The Tempest*. 'The direful spectacle of the wreck, which touch'd/The very virtue of compassion in thee'—but that can wait till the sixth form lesson!

I told the story of the ship laden with kings and courtiers (and ladies of course!)—the storm—the busy sailors—the sarcastic nobles—the sudden violence—wreck—and all hands lost. A piece from Debussy's *La Mer* seemed to fit well here, and guided those who listened through the sequence. They were in three groups for this; the hall could just accommodate three scenes of action—and it helped them to find individual roles. A few girls found the individual response difficult—clustering in a 'cabin' before the wreck prompted too much 'collective' response. The lesson lacked style rather badly—clear divisions of effort and relaxation; and a good drama teacher's authority. Next time might bring an improvement . . . !

The next day, back in the classroom, I apprehensively dished out thirty copies of *The Tempest* and said I thought they might like to see where I got the idea for the previous lesson. I quickly introduced the characters and decided who would play who, paraphrased some difficult lines and read out some

luscious ones. Then to my amazement they took over. Some sense of area was created from the squashed space by the blackboard—that corner as the cabin, the desk the ship's wheel—and they were off. A girl who had played a chorus part in the school Gilbert and Sullivan took Gonzalo 'the honest old counsellor'—and straightforwardly remarked 'I'll warrant him for drowning; though the ship were no stronger than a nut shell, and as leaky as an unstanched wench'. A boy with fat cheeks and a shock of hair took a deep breath and announced 'A pox o' your throat! you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!' This quickly became a rallying cry, and several others jumped up with demands to play the part. We reeled to the end of the scene—most of the audience joining in—'Farewell my wife and children! Farewell brother! We split, we split, we split!' Before I had collected my wits for discussion, another cast had leapt to the front, jostling for parts and places—'Here master —what cheer?' 'Shut up—I'm the Boatswain.' The longer speeches were often mumbled or skipped, and a conscientious boy scratched his head over 'Though every drop of water swear against it/And gape at wid'st to glut him', which annoyed his impatient listeners.

By the end of the second performance, there was indeed 'A confused noise within' Classroom 19. Exhortations to the audience to draw a picture or write your own version of the scene passed mainly unheeded. Eventually the drama was submerged under noisy criticisms from those who hadn't had parts and those who felt insulted by a rival. Extraneous conversations had sprung up—soon would come the bell and home for tea. The next day I tried Scene 2—but there was too much explanation to be done, and, though one girl had taken a fancy to playing Miranda, the rest were bored. I promised to come to Caliban, and perhaps we will.

I am not sure if there's much to be learnt from this—but I was surprised and delighted by the immediate response to the actual text. Patently this was not a literary lesson—there was no discussion and very little elucidation of the text. Yet they were fascinated by the words—the good mouth-filling oaths, the shrieks of the sailors, the boatswain's technical jargon and the nobles' arrogant imprecations. If we had met the scene in a 'set book', I am sure they would have rejected it—it needed the impetus of some personal dramatic exploration first. Shakespeare's language then becomes a tool to handle, however unskilfully at first, in a recognised situation. It extends the role and unleashes new energy. 'A pox o' your throat! you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!'—he might not forget that!

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED
BY Andrew Bannerman and The Use of English
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING
UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF
EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE
THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF
THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."